

Intermediary Says Hanoi Is Flexible

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Sen. J. W. Fulbright (D-Ark.) made public last night a report by an "intermediary" in the Vietnam peace talks who claimed it is "untrue" that Hanoi is inflexible on negotiations.

The self-styled intermediary is Joseph R. Starobin, former foreign editor of the Communist Daily Worker and now an assistant professor at York University in Toronto, Canada.

In a letter to Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Starobin said he twice acted as an intermediary between Henry A. Kissinger, presidential adviser on national security, and Xuan Thuy, North Vietnam's chief negotiator in Paris.

Starobin contended that these exchanges showed that in September the North Vietnamese were ready to bargain in private "for something between their conceptions and American conceptions" and expressed hope of a settlement in "four or five months." President Nixon, on the contrary, said on Nov. 3 that all U.S. overtures, public and private, met "absolute refusal" by the Communist side "to join us in seeking a just peace."

Fulbright said he raised the subject of Starobin's report to Kissinger both in Tuesday's closed hearing on Vietnam with Secretary of State William P. Rogers, and in yesterday's closed hearing with Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird. "Sanitized versions of their testimony will be made public later," said Fulbright.

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Both seemed to know of Starobin's report, said Fulbright, but "evidently they don't put any faith in it." Fulbright said the only reaction he got from the Cabinet officers was "the usual one that they (the Communist side) won't negotiate." There was no immediate comment from the White House.

There have been some brief, previously-published reports of Starobin's discussions with Kissinger. Fulbright emphasized yesterday that he does not know Starobin and is not "vouching" for him.

What led to public airing of the subject yesterday, Fulbright indicated, was the great emphasis by Laird on "progress" in the "Vietnamization" process of transferring U.S. combat duties to South Vietnamese forces.

Secretary Praised

Laird drew praise from many Committee members, including Fulbright, for much of his testimony. In it, Laird told newsmen later, he disclosed that there has been "some increase in infiltration during the last two weeks" in South Vietnam. Laird declined to assess its significance. President Nixon, on Nov. 3, approvingly noted a sharp drop in infiltration.

But Laird balked at giving the committee any timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces or for the completion of the Vietnamization process.

The Laird testimony also produced a new wrinkle in terminology for U.S. troops who will remain in South Vietnam after American combat troops are withdrawn: "transitional forces," instead of the earlier term, "residual forces."

In October, Laird publicly used the residual term in its narrowest sense of retaining

some few thousands of U.S. advisers or training personnel. The new term is far broader, as well as being more politically palatable.

Laird said the "transitional forces" would be progressively "Vietnamized" too. But he offered no dates, saying "the Vietnamization program would be carried out in a reasonable time frame."

Fulbright told newsmen he clearly favors "Vietnamization" over the previous policy of "search and destroy" and "maximum pressure." But "Vietnamization," Fulbright protested, "could be a prescription for a very prolonged war."

While Laird offered no figures, Fulbright said he would "guess" from what Laird described that Laird is planning "transitional forces" on "the order of 200,000 men," including air, logistic, and "enough (combat) troops there to protect our troops."

"This is a program for the continuation of the war," said Fulbright. While both Rogers and Laird say "negotiations" are the first priority for Nixon administration, with Vietnamization the second track, "they give me the impression that they have no hope" for negotiation.

Repeats Belief

Fulbright then questioned whether in fact all possibilities of negotiation are being explored, and he raised the Starobin report in that framework. Fulbright repeated his belief that the "chief stumbling block" for negotiations is United States' support for the present South Vietnamese government's attempt to retain "complete control" over that nation.

Starobin, he said, is "a man who professes to be in touch with the North Vietnamese" and who claims they will bargain. The correspondence

which Fulbright showed newsmen was initiated by Starobin. In it, Starobin mentioned that he had met the late North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh (who died Sept. 3) "in the jungles of North Vietnam in 1953."

Starobin said Xuan Thuy told him on Sept. 1 that if the United States shows "good faith by withdrawing 100,000 troops," North Vietnam would hold private talks with it, either with or without the Vietcong representatives present.

The Hanoi envoy said his government was prepared "to examine the various points which have been advanced by both sides. It is not true that we reject everything that the United States may propose."

In "cross-discussion in which I was twice an intermediary," said Starobin, the North Vietnamese indicated:

- "They would accept the principle of complete withdrawal instead of total and prior withdrawal as the condition which could open the way to private talks with the United States;

- "... A readiness to talk without the presence of the Vietcong (at least as of Sept. 1);

- "... they would not be adamant on a provisional government defined by their side but were ready to bargain for something between their conceptions and the American conceptions, making room for some members of the present Saigon administration."

"They also indicated strongly their readiness for a reasonable, logical and speedy end of the war, using the phrase 'within four or five months,'" Starobin said.

Fulbright also noted that Starobin said he reported these and other points to Kissinger, with whom he conferred twice

on Aug. 12 at San Clemente, where he told Kissinger of his first meeting with Xuan Thuy on July 26 in Paris and on Sept. 10 at the White House where he reported to Kissinger on his second Sept. 1 meeting with the Hanoi negotiators.

Felt Obligated

Starobin, who first wrote to Fulbright on Oct. 15, said in a subsequent letter on Nov. 1 that he felt doubly obliged to report activities after hearing the President's speech of Nov. 3 on Vietnam.

That showed, Starobin stated, that "the attempt is being made to give the impression that the other side will not be flexible which is untrue, and to cling to the Thieu regime as the only legitimate regime (for South Vietnam) and to hold the card of further troop withdrawal as a bargaining counter."

Meanwhile, the State Department issued a clarification yesterday of Secretary Rogers' testimony the day before about "numerous diplomatic contacts" with North Vietnam, before and since the death of Ho Chi Minh.

State Department spokesman Carl E. Bartsch said Rogers "was talking about third-party contacts" since Ho's death; "he was not referring to any direct contact with Hanoi." Bartsch said it could be assumed that the Soviet Union was among the third-parties.

Sen. George D. Aiken (R-Vt.), after a conference with President Nixon yesterday, said he expects "nearly all" American combat troops will be out of Vietnam by the end of 1970, "if there are no unforeseen disastrous events." Aiken said the President is "definitely on the right track" for peace, and "if I were the President I would take a chance on withdrawing more troops" by Christmas.